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Yoo Guan TAN

Singapore Management University, ygtan@smu.edu.sg

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Thoughts and Propositions

Tan Yoo Guan

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Thoughts and Propositions

In “Reference and Contingency”, Gareth Evans maintains that it is possible for an expression both to be a proper name and to have a descriptive sense. Evans calls such names *descriptive names*. He further claims that if ‘a’ is a name whose reference is fixed by a definite description ‘the ϕ ’, then ‘a’ will have the same sense as ‘the ϕ ’. Against Kripke’s objection that names and descriptions are not interchangeable *salva veritate* within modal contexts, Evans argues that the objection is based upon a false assumption about the connection between contents (thoughts in Frege’s sense) and propositions (sets of possible worlds). On his view, a name whose reference is fixed by a definite description will take on the sense of the description but not its modal properties. One cannot therefore argue from a difference in proposition to a difference in content.

I am critical of Evans’s thesis that sentences that are associated with different propositions can have the same content. In part I, I put forward my objection to the thesis. In part II, I show that the possibility of descriptive names does not require it.

I

Suppose (to borrow Evans’s example) we introduce the name ‘Julius’ by means of the following stipulation:

- (1) Let us use ‘Julius’ to refer to whoever invented the zip.

Then the sentence 'Julius is F' will be epistemically equivalent to 'The inventor of the zip is F', in that, anyone who understands the stipulation will know *a priori* that these two sentences have the same truth-value. This seems to imply that the two sentences have the same content. On the other hand, 'Julius is F' is not necessarily equivalent to 'The inventor of the zip is F', for

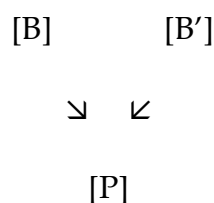
(2) It is necessary that Julius is an inventor

is arguably false, whereas

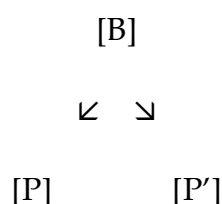
(3) It is necessary that the inventor of the zip is an inventor

is unambiguously true. And this seems to imply that the two sentences do not have the same content.

There is clearly a tension here, one which can only be removed by rejecting one of the putative implications. Evans chooses to drop the second. He writes: "Just as we accept the situation which we may represent as follows (with B for thoughts and P for propositions):



in which distinct statements are modally indistinguishable, so we must accept the situation:



in which epistemically equivalent sentences are modally distinguishable. This may sound very grand, but it amounts to nothing more than this: that sentences with the same content might embed differently within the scope of modal operators”.

On Evans’s view, the sentences ‘Julius is F’ and ‘The inventor of the zip is F’ have the same content, that is, express the same Fregean thought. Since the two sentences are associated with different propositions, this implies that one and the same thought can correspond to two distinct propositions. This result does not seem to me to be coherent, for the following reason.

Let J be the thought that is the content of ‘Julius is F’ and Z be the thought that is the content of ‘The inventor of the zip is F’. Each of these thoughts can be evaluated as true or false, not only in relation to the actual world, but also in relation to each possible world. Thus, suppose that Z is the thought that one and only one man invented the zip and he is F. Then Z will be true at a world w just in case there is someone in w who invented the zip and that person is F in w . Let $P1$ be the set of all and only those possible worlds in which J is true and $P2$ be the set of all and only those possible worlds in which Z is true. By common consent, $P1$ and $P2$ are distinct propositions. This means that either there is a world u which is in $P1$ but not in $P2$, or there is a world v which is in $P2$ but not in $P1$. It can be shown that each one of these alternatives leads to a contradiction. Consider the first alternative: there is a world u which is in $P1$ but not in $P2$:

1. J is true in u . (P1, stipulation)
2. $J = Z$ (Evans's thesis)
3. So Z is true in u . (1,2 substitution)
4. Z is not true in u . (P2, stipulation)
5. So Z is true in u and not true in u . (3,4 conjunction)

On the other alternative, which assumes that there is a world v which is in $P2$ but not $P1$, we are led, by similar steps, to the contradiction that J is true in v and not true in v .

If both the inferences in the above argument are valid, then we may safely reject premise 2, and hence Evans's thesis, as false. Of the two inferences, only the first – from 1 and 2 to 3 – could possibly be called into question. Against any such doubts, I have no argument other than the firm intuition that something as strong as identity of content ought to license substitution within the context ' $_$ is true in a possible world w '. I also have two points to make. First, anyone who rejects the inference as invalid must have an argument for holding that $J = Z$ that is not in the same way open to question, and Evans does not have one. His claim, that 'Julius is F' and 'The inventor of the zip is F' express the same thought, is based on the premise that the two sentences are epistemically equivalent, but epistemic equivalence, while necessary for sameness of content, it is not sufficient. For instance, the sentence 'Sulphur is yellow' is epistemically equivalent to the sentence 'Sulphur is yellow and triangles have three sides', but these sentences clearly

do not have the same content. Hence Evans has no certain basis for rejecting the above inference.

Second, the incoherence of the Evans' position can be shown without the inference. Let's assume that 'Julius is F' and 'The inventor of the zip is F' have the same content, T . As before, we take a proposition corresponding to a thought to be a total set of possible worlds in which the thought is true. Then for T to correspond to two distinct propositions there must exist a world w which belongs to one of these propositions but not to the other. To meet the first condition, T would have to be true in w , while to meet the second, T would have to be false in w . Once again, we get the result that for the same thought to correspond to the two different propositions, there must be a world in which that thought is both true and not true.

If a thought cannot correspond to distinct propositions, can two sentences have the same content sentences if they are associated with different propositions? We can show that the answer is no by means of the following principle, which connects the truth of a sentence with the truth of its content:

- (4) A sentence S whose content is a thought T is true with respect to a possible world w if and only if T is true in w .

If 'Julius is F' and 'The inventor of the zip is F' are associated with different propositions, there must be a possible world with respect to which one of the sentences is true and the other false. As before, let J be the thought expressed

by 'Julius is F' and Z be the thought expressed by 'The inventor of the zip is F'. Suppose w is a world with respect to which 'Julius is F' is false and 'The inventor of the zip is F' is true. Then it will follow from (4) that J is false in w and Z is true in w . But if J is true, and Z false, in w , then according to our previous result, J and Z must be different thoughts. Hence if 'Julius is F' and 'The inventor of the zip is F' are associated with different propositions, the two sentences cannot have the same content. Contrary to Evans, there appears to be no situation in which sentences that have the same content are modally distinguishable.

II

If what we have said so far is correct, then the two sentences 'Julius is F' and 'The inventor of the zip is F' must either correspond to the same proposition or express different thoughts. My view is that these two sentences do not have the same sense, although they may be used to express the same thought. To see how this can be so, let us bring in the expression 'the actual ϕ ', the use of which is governed by the following clause:

- (5) $(\forall x)(\forall w)(\text{'The actual } \phi \text{' applies to } x \text{ with respect to } w \text{ iff } x \text{ uniquely invented the zip in the actual world } w^*)$

The sentence 'Julius is F' will then have the same sense as the sentence 'The actual inventor of the zip is F'. But this last sentence does not have the same sense as 'The inventor of the zip is F'. This follows from Frege's principle that the sense of a sentence is compounded from the senses of its constituent,

together with the fact that 'the ϕ ' and 'the actual ϕ ' do not have the same sense (owing to a difference in constituents). Evans has argued that these two sentences have the same content because, when applied to the actual world, they both yield the same result – they both require of the actual world w^* that the person who is the inventor of the zip in w^* be F in w^* . But the most that we can infer from this is that the two sentences *can be used* to express the same thought, a fact which is quite compatible with their not having the same sense.

To illustrate the last point, consider the parallel case of cross-temporal reference. A description like 'The King of France' may pick out different persons at different times of utterance. One way of making the description temporally rigid is to incorporate a time reference, say 'in 1600', into the description. The result – 'the King of France in 1600' – will be a description which designates the same person with respect to different times of utterance. But we could express the sense of this description without explicitly mentioning the time reference. As Strawson says, a description like 'the King of France' could be used to refer to a single individual. In such a case, the time reference is supplied by the context of utterance. Therefore a sentence like 'The King of France is bald' could be used, in the appropriate context, to express the same thought as that which is expressed by the sentence 'The King of France in 1600 is bald'. In this example, it is clear that the two

sentences do not have the same sense; the difference is that the time reference is part of the sense of the latter but not of the former.

In the present case, a similar difference can be discerned: the sense of 'The inventor of the zip is F' contains no reference to the actual world, but the sense of 'The actual inventor of the zip is F' does contain such a reference. But just as the description 'the King of France' can be used to express a sense which contains a time reference, so too, the description 'the inventor of the zip' can be used to express a sense which contains a reference to a world. This is precisely what gets expressed in the context of the reference-fixing stipulation that involves the description. Thus when Evans says that we are barred from saying

(6) If you had invented the zip, you would have been Julius

by the agreement to use the name 'Julius' to refer to whoever was the inventor of the zip, he is clearly relying on the understanding that in the context of the stipulation, the description 'the inventor of the zip' is to mean the actual person who invented the zip.

A sentence like 'The inventor of the zip is an inventor' can therefore be used to express two different thoughts. First there is the thought which is identical to the sense of the sentence. This thought is true at a world w just in case the person who uniquely invented the zip in w is an inventor at w . It is therefore necessarily true. But under certain circumstances, the sentence can be used to say the same thing as the sentence 'The actual inventor of the zip is

an inventor'. This thought is true at a world w just in case the person who uniquely invented the zip at w^* is an inventor in w . It is therefore contingent. Thus, it is not that one and the same thought can correspond to two distinct propositions, one of which is necessary and the other contingent. Rather, it is that a sentence like 'The inventor of the zip is F ' can be used to express two different thoughts, one of which is necessary and the other contingent.

Yoo Guan Tan
School of Economics and Social Sciences
Singapore Management University
Singapore 259756

Reference:

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